

# Multilingualism and Nation Building: Language and Education in Eritrea

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This paper focuses on language choice in the newest nation in the Horn of Africa within a broader context of language policy in multilingual states. Pre-colonial and post-colonial language policies in Eritrea are surveyed in relation to evolving linguistic and political nationalism. Language contact and its social consequences are discussed in an attempt to shed light on language policies pursued during different periods in the colonial history of Eritrea. Using descriptive frameworks provided by contemporary sociolinguistics, post-independence language policy, with language and education at the centre, is looked at from the perspective of the functional allocation of nine Eritrean languages and the points at which they conflict and complement each other. Public responses and evaluations are analysed and implications for further research are advanced.

## Language and Nation in Africa

When geography, political borders, religion, ethnicity and language all coincide, there is generally very little conflict over language policy, and the minority groups whose political aspirations and language practices differ from the monolingual majority often find very little room to make a claim for plurilingualism. When, however, categories such as geography, ethnicity, and religion cut across language and literacy, the potential for controversy and even conflict multiplies. If we add to this a long history of war and colonialism, we begin to get some insight into the complexity of the language situation in Eritrea, one of the world's most recently independent nations. Central highlanders are predominantly Christian and speakers of Tigrigna, the same name serving as their ethnicity. But there are also Tigrigna who live outside the central highlands as non-natives of those areas, or who practice Islam and who speak Tigre or one or another of Eritrea's nine major languages. By the same token, there are Tigre, for the most part Moslems who live in the lowlands and make up Eritrea's second largest ethnolinguistic group, who speak Tigrigna or are bilingual in Tigre and Tigrigna and practice one of three major varieties of Christianity in Eritrea. While the Tigrigna and Tigre account for approximately eighty% of the population of Eritrea, there are seven other groups whose geographic, political, religious, and ethnolinguistic identity cut across traditional sociolinguistic categories. This

paper is an attempt to describe some of this complexity and indicate some of the major issues involved in Eritrea's emerging language policy.

Among Africans, 'nationality' is taken to mean a sub-national entity, and 'nationalism', a related concept, refers to ethnic solidarity and related sentiments. To add to the complexity, 'nation' refers to the politico-geographic notion, which African states have inherited from colonialism. In this same vein, 'nationism' represents the sense of political community which accompanies this geo-political notion. As a result of these terminological distinctions, 'nationalism' is understood to represent a sociocultural identity that may not have a corresponding geo-political realisation. The interplay of these concepts on the background of African ethno-cultural patterns which have evolved from inter-group behaviour and solidarity is deemed important for an understanding of contemporary language policy developments and decision-making. Moreover, such a conceptual and terminological distinction provides 'greater insight into why social solidarity is not a precondition for the existence of a national political community and how a national political community can attain such solidarity in successive steps' (Fishman, 1968: 39). The validity of this statement of Fishman seems to have been corroborated in the evolution of Eritrean nationalism, which is one of the issues, treated in this paper.

When elites of (geo-political) nationalist movements took power from their colonisers, they inherited various population groups with distinct languages and cultures. According to Abdulaziz (1991), Somalia is an exception to this pattern, being one of the few African countries, which is largely monolingual and ethnically uniform. While the elites in Somalia or in most African countries have been successful in rallying their respective populations to independence, they have been far less successful in attempts to create a strong sense of nationhood. Selection of languages for national communication, a decision-making process embodied with power and prestige, was at the centre of the problem. Another unique example among African countries, Tanzania is cited for promoting what was originally the language of one of its minority groups in order to unite its multilingual population and to serve as the post-independence national language. Kiswahili had been the language of the political elites during the movement for independence. This fact, according to Rubagumya (1990: 9), 'enhanced the status of the language after independence, for it was now rightly regarded as the national language'.

## **Historical Background**

Eritrea is a small country in the Horn of Africa with approximately 119,000 square kilometres of landspace and a population of about 3.5 million (Habte Selassie, 1980). The country is bordered on the north and west by the Sudan, and on the South by Ethiopia and Djibouti. Since 1889, Eritrea has existed within the same external boundaries since the treaty signed between Menelik, King of Ethiopia, and the Italians.

Eritrea's history is one of conflict, revolving around Eritrea's claim for nationhood versus Ethiopia's contention that Eritrea formed an organic part of Ethiopia. Like many post-colonial states, Eritrea is a territorial entity of the nineteenth century created by European colonialism and thus entitled to the

right to self-determination. At the end of the Second World War, Italy lost possession of all its colonies. Although the United Nations approved independence for Italy's former colonies, it decided in favour of federation of Eritrea with Ethiopia. The debate in the United Nations General Assembly and the subsequent resolutions give some of the background and the role of the great powers. Space limitations do not allow full details; we present only the highlights of major events.

Many factors militate against Eritrea's right to self-determination. The country's multi-ethnic composition has been exaggerated and used to present the country as too fragmented linguistically and religiously to sustain a single nation. The British used this approach as early as 1943 to divide Eritrea into a Christian portion that would join Ethiopia and a Moslem part that would form part of the Sudan (Habte Selassie, 1980). That scheme was, however, rejected by the Eritreans themselves (Tesfay, 1997).

The years between 1941 and 1952 were marked by major events and political turbulence. Ethnic and religious politics, hitherto unknown, was introduced during this period. By 1945 three political 'parties' or groups had already been formed. These were: The Eritrean Independence Party, The Islamic League Party, and the Unionist Party. The present government, the successor of the Eritrean Peoples' Liberation Front (EPLF), would argue that whether Eritrea was divided (as conceived by Western writers) and whether the greater part of the highlands formed an organic part of Ethiopia is a debate which should be limited to academics. The essential problem was defined as a matter of self-identification. Ethiopian historians' claim that 'Eritrea, known as *Mereb Melash*, possesses no identity it can claim as its own other than the north Ethiopian identity' (Abbay, 1998) is dismissed by Eritrean scholars.

According to Ghebre-Medhin (1989), a critic of Ethiopian studies, the idea of Greater Ethiopia has dominated regional studies in the area for decades. Thus, Ethiopia was studied as a distinct and unique entity, with the Abyssinians as carriers of a 'superior' culture, and the rest of the peoples in the empire were to be seen as inferior. Although Ethiopia, according to Clapham (1988: 195) 'is no less ethnically varied than other African states, the political role of ethnicity has differed significantly'. Ethiopia was an empire with the Amharic language as the core of the 'cultural area', and it gave little weight to issues of ethnic origin and rights. As Hameso (1997) noted, in the 1880s when Emperor Menelik a Shoan Amhara expanded his domain beyond the traditionally feudal Abyssinia, the effect was soon matched by linguistic, political and cultural domination. It was the Haileselassie regime which consolidated the rule of the Amhara by promoting the Amharic language to a 'national status' (Bloom & Tamrat, 1996). The origin and construction of the Eritrean national identity needs, then, to be looked at against this background.

After years of neglect, the role of ethnic and religious divisions in Eritrea is gaining attention. There are scholars who hold that religious and ethnic cleavages are stronger than nationalist feelings (Araya, 1990; Abbay, 1998; Negash, 1997). These writers base their observations mainly on the history of Eritrean nationalist movements and the role of ethnic and religious movements, with particular reference to the 1940s. The competing view interprets Eritrean nationalism as a widely shared sentiment superseding narrow ethnic and religious ties with unity strengthened by the war against Ethiopia (Markakis, 1994; Ottaway,

1998). A third perspective views Eritrean identity as a dynamic phenomenon in a constant process of construction (Tesfay, 1997). On the whole, it can be argued that the period of Italian rule contributed by its very length to the strengthening of a sense of Eritrean national identity (Erlich, 1983; Patman, 1990). But that national identity in subsequent periods (1941–1952; 1952–1961; 1961–1991) may not be fully understood without proper analysis of the process of interaction, competition, and conflict among the various cultural groups as well as between the cultural groups and the nationalist movements in their efforts to gain political power in Eritrea (Woldemikael, 1993). According to Tesfay (1997), ‘the political parties of the 1940s and 1950s were so loosely organised that members could move from one to the other, with amazing fluidity and frequency’. The politics of the 1940s seem to have provided a somewhat distorted impression. Moreover, the political and social history needs to be looked at in the context of regional and international political alignment. A brief account of the events leading to the disposal of Eritrea by the United Nations and the role Great Britain, Ethiopia and the United States should give a much clearer understanding of the origins of the conflict.

The origin of the Eritrean conflict can be traced particularly to the period between 1941 and 1952. That was when the first generation of anti-colonialists failed to form a coalition capable of establishing a united Eritrean state to counter Ethiopia’s claims. Eyob (1995) argues the de-colonisation of Eritrea was complicated by six factors:

- (1) The overriding interest of the liberating allied forces, which delayed the process of de-colonisation;
- (2) an international consensus which favoured Ethiopia’s territorial claims;
- (3) Ethiopia’s intervention in the internal Eritrean political arena;
- (4) the absence of any cohesive political institution capable of reconciling the divergent interests of multi-ethnic Eritrean society;
- (5) the politicization of long standing religious and regional rivalries among the inhabitants; and
- (6) the absence of a neutral and effective international de-colonising agency. (Eyob, 1995: 61)

While the further elaboration on the magnitude of each of these factors may give better understanding, the united intervention of Ethiopia and the United States is documented in the words John Foster Dulles, then US Secretary of State, who stated in a speech before the UN Security Council in 1952, as quoted by Habte Selassie (1980: 58):

From the point of view of justice, the opinions of the Eritrean people must receive consideration. Nevertheless, the strategic intents of the United States in the Red Sea basin and consideration of the security and world peace make it necessary that the country has to be linked with our ally, Ethiopia.

Upon this background of conflict, Eritrea presents a case of neglected colonial struggle. After its resolution to federate Eritrea with Ethiopia against the wishes of its people, the UN never raised the issue of the abrogation of the Federal constitution. November 14, 1962 marked the day of complete annexation of Eritrea by Ethiopia. But the clandestine political struggle, which had already started in the towns, was transformed into an armed struggle in September 1961 by the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF).

## Colonial Language Policy in Eritrea

European colonialism, in spite of some of its negative consequences, has undoubtedly contributed to the social cohesion of the Eritrean peoples. This is particularly true of the impact of the Italian colonial period (1889–1941). Despite self-interest, the Italian colonial administration secured the rule of law and social welfare for the Eritreans (Trevaskis, 1960: 10). Thus, the formation of Eritrea as a political community by bringing together the various nationalities can be attributed in the first instance to the Italians. According to Tseggi (1981: 132):

They connected each other by extensive road systems, telephone, services and railway systems connecting the economically significant cities in Eritrea. For the first time a set of colonial rules and regulations applicable to all nationalities was enforced.

This account, however, should not imply that the Italians had moulded a cohesive political unity. But, as was apparent from the era to follow, this unity did not prove to be too fragile to succumb to the new colonisers' policy of 'divide and rule'. Notwithstanding attempts of more recent colonisers, the British and the Ethiopians, who incited divisions along religious lines, the Eritreans remained united for over a century. As Pateman (1990: 67) writes:

Over the fifty years that the Italians ruled Eritrea, some of the linguistic, religious and ethnic divisions had been broken down. Many saw themselves primarily as Eritreans and not Moslems, Tigrigna or Saho farmers. Differences still remained, differences subsequently exploited cleverly by Ethiopia and unionists within Eritrea.

The Italian period is not noted for its progressive educational policy, as it curbed the native population's eagerness for knowledge by restricting education to the first four years of primary school. In addition, educational policy was both discriminatory and colonialist. It was discriminatory in that it allowed the natives to study for only four years. It was colonialist in that the main content of the curriculum was based on Italian geography, history and culture, as education was perceived as an instrument for enhancing colonial rule (Negash, 1987).

By comparison, the British policy for Eritrean education (1941–1952) afforded far more access to education and advancement of literary traditions. The British promoted Tigrigna and Arabic on the grounds that the two languages could equally serve the majority Christian Tigrigna nationality, which constituted approximately half of the total population of the country, the other half being predominantly Moslem nationalities. This decision represented not only a push forward for the development of the Tigrigna language, but also an important step that ushered the way for use of this language as a language of political debate on the future of Eritrea in the newspapers founded by the British Ministry of Information. Of particular relevance to this topic is that, when the weekly newspaper in the Tigrigna language made its debut in 1942, the British Administration encouraged the formation of the Tigrigna Language Council which was responsible for corpus planning to help Tigrigna cope with its linguistic limitations. These limitations 'revolved mainly around the twin questions of spelling and terminology' (Fellman, 1979: 25).

The rationale behind the British decision to promote only two languages – i.e. Tigrigna and Arabic – as co-official languages and languages of education cannot be accounted for as easily as the Italian policy, which promoted Italian to the exclusion of all local languages. The British policy was based on both linguistic and political grounds. From a linguistic point of view, Tigrigna and Arabic each had a written tradition. Other Eritrean languages had no literary heritage, other than the Bible translation available for Tigre and Kunama. The script most familiar to Moslem Eritreans is Classical Arabic, which is learned via the Koran. Teklehaimanot (1996: 13) describes British educational policy as follows:

Instruction was given in Tigrigna for Christians and Arabic for Moslems. The textbooks in Arabic were procured from Egypt and Sudan; and those in Tigrigna were prepared by the Department [of Education], with the first textbook written by Ato Issac Tewoldemedhen.

The other motive behind British language policy was political, and the political goals of language decisions are often obscured by their overt linguistic ends (Cooper, 1989). The prevailing political conditions during the British Mandate Period help shed light on the other motives for the language policy. The British grand strategy to partition Eritrea, according to Tseggi (1988: 71), 'was drawn up so as to inflame religious animosity between Christians and Moslems to the point that no unity among Eritreans seeking independence would become possible'. According to Trevaskis (1960), author of the most authoritative but not necessarily the most objective chronicle of that period, religious differences which were muted during the Italian period began to surface with the economic crisis. Trevaskis reports that the Christian Highlanders were suspicious of British intentions, since they felt that the British discriminated against them in favour of other groups, viz. the highland trader community, Italians, Arabs and Sudanese. The religious enmity fomented by the British culminated in an armed clash in the capital Asmara at about the same time as the future of Eritrea was being discussed at the United Nations (1950–1952). Meanwhile, the Ethiopians used the situation to advance their own political ends, initiating a guerrilla war by infiltrating into Eritrea (Tseggi, 1988). The approach taken here is that overt political decision and actions can be used to infer motives behind language policy decisions.

Whatever the covert motive was at that time, Tigrigna and Arabic served as the two official languages until 1956 when the Ethiopian government began encroaching on the Federation Agreement, prior to its total annexation of Eritrea in 1961. Following annexation, Ethiopia declared that both Tigrigna and Arabic should cease to be official languages (Bokru, 1988). Fellman (1979: 26) notes the political origins of this decision when he states that even the '1952 Eritrean [Federal] Government resolution declaring Tigrigna as the official language, along with Arabic, was more a prestige resolution than a linguistic one'.

The development of the Tigrigna language declined with the growing interference of the Imperial government of Ethiopia in the affairs of Eritrea. With the 1950 constitution of the United Nations resolution to grant Eritrea only local autonomy within the Ethiopian Empire, the status of Amharic, Ethiopia's 'national' language began to rise at the expense of Tigrigna. Ethiopian rule was marked by deliberate dismantling of Eritrea's educational and cultural institu-

tions. All textbooks prepared by the Department of Education were collected and burned in a big rubbish area in a suburb of Asmara (Bokru, 1988). Amharic replaced both Tigrigna and Arabic in all official government and school domains. As a consequence, these two languages remained limited to the home environment during the Ethiopian colonial period. The educational consequences are described by Habte Selassie (1980: 61):

The imposition of Amharic not only expressly violated a provision of the UN resolution, but it imposed a potential obstacle in the path of the Eritrean children the effects of which were felt when countless numbers failed secondary and university entrance examinations and were effectively denied higher education.

The last era of Eritrean colonial history (1962–1991) is of greatest sociolinguistic interest. Ethiopian prohibition of Tigrigna, which had achieved official status under the British, was tantamount to waging war on the national identity of the Eritrean people. As Araya (1990: 95) puts it:

The emperor imposed Amharic as the official language in Eritrea, and the resulting widespread resentment undoubtedly helped Eritrean nationalism to thrive thereafter in the highlands.

Indeed, in the long years of struggle for national liberation and self-assertion of national identity, the symbolic function of Tigrigna plays a major role. The liberation struggle, drawing upon a romantic view of the Eritrean past and appealing to a collective memory of that society, succeeded in pulling together all efforts to develop the language, both in the Diaspora and in the areas which were liberated. Efforts exerted by the Eritrean Peoples Liberation Front (EPLF) in all forms of development were described by Leonard (1988: 131) as follows:

I am not aware of any liberation front which under the conditions of a prolonged war of national liberation, has achieved the level of political, social and economic development one observes today in Eritrea.

But also, the Social Affairs Bureau of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF) which directed the Education and Literacy Campaign Department, was successful in wiping out illiteracy from among the ranks of its fighters (ELF Foreign Information Centre, 1977).

## Multilingualism and Language Planning

In the above an attempt was made to distinguish the term 'nation' as used in the African context from the nation-state of the European model, a monolingual political entity with well-defined geographic boundaries. In this latter conception, the development of a sense of nation as an outcome of long ethno-cultural processes is understood in light of the history of human social development evolving a sense of nation (Mansour, 1993). Despite the fact that multilingualism is a common phenomena shared by many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America, it has been regarded as a problem that works against nationalism or the sense of nation (Fasold, 1984: 4). It has been equated with chaos and associated with underdevelopment, resulting from lack of proper societal communication.

No causal connection has yet demonstrated this assertion. In fact, community and individual multilingualism in many African states facilitates communication processes in different settings at inter-ethnic, sub-national or national levels of communication. As Mazrui and Mazrui (1992: 84) state:

Africa's ethnic heterogeneity finds its differentiation in language. Per capita there is a wider range of languages than in any other region of the world. By strange twist of destiny, there are also more French-speaking, English-speaking and Portuguese-speaking countries in Africa than anywhere else in the world.

Many studies are handicapped by a bias that the achievement of national and linguistic unification is a condition for the attainment of nationalism and progress in general. In the Eritrean perspective particular historical facts provide an insight into how a strong sense of nation could be forged in the process of the common history that binds peoples together. As Markakis (1994: 6) puts it: 'In the course of the long struggle, regional solidarity evolved into identity that can be called national, at least in the case of Eritrea'.

Early recognition of societal multilingualism as a communication problem was what induced sociolinguists to think of 'language manipulation' as a solution to this problem (Stewart, 1968: 532). Language planning is limited in its scope when it is considered an activity to solve language problems, as indicated by its early definition as the 'organised pursuit of solutions to language problems typically at the national level' (Fishman, 1974: 79). With the evolution of sociolinguistics over the last two decades, there are now models for analysis of multilingual situations and policies available to deal with these situations. The study of language policy, therefore, which constitutes an important component in the study of language planning, has recently attracted the attention of a variety of social science disciplines. In its broadest sense, language planning can be defined as 'deliberate efforts to influence the behaviour of others with respect to acquisition, structure or functional allocation of their language codes' (Cooper, 1989: 45).

Decision making with respect to the functional allocation of languages is indeed an essential aspect of language planning and provides a common ground of discussion for our present purpose. According to Bamgbose (1989) such decisions may affect language status or the development of a corpus, and they may occur at any point in the planning process. It is also pointed out that implementation of 'language planning' often occurs in the absence of a coherent policy which has been deliberated upon prior to its initiation. Moreover, many language 'policies' are carried out locally without either coherent policy or planning initiatives (Grabe, 1994). These phenomena imply that policy decisions ought not to be considered absolute formulas to produce specific results. As in social planning in general, language planning is not only unpredictable but also may produce unexpected consequences (Fishman, 1974).

The unpredictable nature of the projected outcomes of a social policy may, however, serve as an excuse for an arbitrary policy adopted by planners without due consideration to the inherent fluidity and variability of local situations. This is particularly true of fundamental decisions taken at the governmental level with respect to questions such as whether a language should be an official one or



whether it should be a medium of instruction. Such decisions may be received positively or negatively and accompanied by sudden shifts in attitudes, influenced by the prevailing social forces of change. For example, after the fall of the Soviet Union, there were strong tendencies to abandon the Cyrillic alphabet in Kazakhstan as well as in the neighbouring central Asian republics of Kirghizstan and Turkmenistan (Coulmas, 1994). Similarly, in Eritrea the Geez script, a tradition peculiar to the languages in Eritrea and Ethiopia, is received with less enthusiasm by some Tigre speakers on religious and sociocultural grounds rather than because of its phonological inadequacy (Mahmud, 1996).

In dealing with multilingualism and the processes of nation-building, developing countries have had to find ways of balancing the twin goals of national unity and multilingual diversity. The success of some language policies does not necessarily depend on the type of policy approach selected. Policies apparently progressive or democratic at the level of rhetoric have sometimes proved failures in practice. As Coulmas (1994: 39) shows, 'both the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia had overtly liberal language policies, based on the principle of language equality. (...) Nonetheless, Russian was the language of power and advancement in the Soviet Union as was Serbo-Croatian in Yugoslavia'. The former Soviet Union was not necessarily a failure of pluralism, but perhaps a failure to apply pluralist principles systematically, in language policy as in other domains (Mansur, 1993). A dichotomy between pluralism and assimilation can be misleading and cannot capture the inherent complexity of the local situation.

### **Eritrean Ethnolinguistic Diversity**

Before addressing the current state of Eritrea's language policy, the present section offers a general sociolinguistic portrait of the nation with a focus on its multilingualism. Among the sociolinguistic categories relevant for generating this picture are geographic distribution, demographic size, clan and ethnic origin. The description of special status languages is also given distinct treatment because of its importance in status planning. In addition, information about literary traditions and the influence of colonialism on the sociolinguistic portrait are discussed. It is important to note that the resulting portrait is not a definitive empirical sociolinguistic profile the Eritrean language situation. Due to a lack of recent statistical data, the present portrait will rely on speculative estimates based on secondary sources as well as a variety of as yet unpublished sources and reports. Although many reports, e.g. the UNICEF (1994) document, still describe the relative size of ethnic groups in terms of percentages, others express reservations about the statistical validity of these figures.

Lambert (1996) has described Eritrea as a 'mosaic' consisting of nine nationalities, but the cultural, linguistic, and religious diversity is so complex and overlapping that these groups do not fit a single classification. While Clapham's (1996) reference to Eritrea as 'African Belgium' is used in the political sense to stress the 'artificiality' of the state, Woldemikael (1993) has observed that Eritrea shows a great deal of fluidity due to factors such as widespread ethnic mixing, religious conversion, migration, conquest and wars in the region. A dichotomous categorisation of Tigrigna-speaking Christian highlanders versus Moslem lowlanders assumes connections between language, religion and geography.

Residents of the Central Highlands generally belong to the Tigrigna nationality and are predominantly Christians. In the lowlands on both the eastern and western side of the highlands, formerly called Gash, Barka, Semhar and Senhit, live the other nationalities who identify predominantly with Islamic religious practices. While the majority of the highlanders are settled agriculturists, the lowlanders are nomads, semi-nomads or settled agriculturists. Although no reliable census has been published as yet for the population of these communities nor for Eritrea's total population, the working figures generally set the Christian and Moslem populations at more or less 50% each. The following data, taken from EPLF (1977; 1987) and Pool (1997), attempt to describe Eritrean ethnolinguistic diversity. With the exception of the Bilen (nationality name) whose language is called Bilin, in the following enumeration the name of the nationality also refers to the language of this nationality.

The majority of the *Tigrigna* nationality who live in the Central Highlands belong to the Coptic Orthodox Church; a minority are Catholics and Protestants.

The *Tigre* live in a large area around the Central Highlands in the north-eastern and western lowlands in the regions called the Senhit, Sahel and Semhar. The majority of Tigre are pastoral and agro-pastoral. They are organised in tribes with varying degrees of solidarity. They are overwhelmingly Moslem.

The *Afar* inhabit the Dankalia, the most arid region located along the southern coast. With the exception of small groups who live off agriculture or fishing and trading, the Afar are nomadic pastoralists. They are very tightly organised socially, and entirely Moslem.

The *Kunama* occupy the region around a small town called Barentu. They are an agrarian people with some cultural elements of a communal society. While many Kunama are Christians and Moslems, animist practices are still prevalent in the society. The Kunama are the minority group on which Italian colonialism and missionaries left its strongest influence in terms of religion and literacy.

The *Nara* live to the north and east of Barentu. They are followers of Islam and live off agriculture. They are surrounded by the Tigre nationality and are among the nationalities least influenced by colonialism. National solidarity is strong among this group.

The *Bilen* is a nationality that resides in areas around the towns of Keren and Hagaz. They are surrounded by the two majority nationalities, the Tigrigna and Tigre. They are followers of either Islam or Christianity.

The *Saho* live in a large area spread over the eastern escarpments stretched down the coastal areas of the Red Sea, adjacent to the Tigrigna nationality of Akeleguzay and the Tigre of Semhar on the east and north. The Saho are predominantly Moslems and, other than those living in towns, have remained relatively insulated from the influences of colonialism.

The *Hidareb*, who are called Bejas in the Sudan, are also one of the nationalities least influenced by colonialism. They live in an area spread over the northwestern part of the country that stretches up to the Sudanese border. The Nara and Hidareb are affiliated culturally to the Tigre.

The *Rashida* are Arabic speakers living along the coasts of the Red Sea from around Emberemi and She'eb to Karora, the northern tip of the country. Traditional agriculture is practised in some of the localities in the community, but the Rashida are fairly mobile, engaging in pastoral farming and trade.

According to UNICEF (1994) data the Tigrigna nationality is the largest of all, making up 50% of the total population. Demographically, the second largest group is the Tigre which makes up 31% of the total. In terms of distribution, the Tigrigna nationality is the most widely spread over the major towns of the country. But geographically, the area where the Tigre language is spoken as a first language is the largest. In a recent survey in 12 major towns in the country (National Statistics and Evaluation, 1997: 23), the Tigrigna-speaking nationality was found to comprise over 77% of the total population, followed by the Tigre, which made up 13% of the population in those 12 towns. Another feature of Eritrean linguistic diversity is the highlander and lowlander residential distinction, which also denotes a religious distinction between Christians and Moslems. Notwithstanding, these social distinctions, no natural barriers mark linguistic territoriality. Even before the new internal regional divisions were created, geographic and linguistic borders did not coincide. The Tigre speakers, for instance, are spread over the areas formerly called Sahel, Semhar, and parts of Senhit and Barka. And the Saho nationality lives in both highland and lowland areas. The religious, regional, and nationality boundaries also cut across geographic boundaries.

Linguistically the nine most widely-spoken languages in Eritrea fall into three major language families. Afar, Bilin, Hidareb and Saho are Kushitic languages, Tigrigna, Tigre and Arabic belong to the Semitic group, and Nara and Kunama are Nilo-Saharan. The languages within each family are characterised by dialect differences that lead to different degrees of mutual intelligibility. As far as the nature of bilingualism is concerned, it is not easy to state the degree of bilingualism for each group with any degree of confidence. It can be generally argued that the majority of the western lowland dwellers speak Tigre as either a first or a second language. The question of whether Arabic is a real lingua franca at a national or sub-national level is in need of investigation.

It would be naive to generalise that all Eritrean Moslems understand Arabic without proper qualification in terms of the level of understanding, the domains of use, and the nationality of the speakers. (The special role of Arabic in Eritrea is discussed later in this paper.)

Existence of a literary tradition is an important factor in the description of Eritrean ethnolinguistic diversity. Although the literary heritage of the Tigrigna language is not a long one, it has been a written language since the arrival of missionaries and the onset of colonialism (from approximately the 1880s). Tigrigna is written in Geez orthography, as attested by religious books and written laws. Geez script is the indigenous script with the longest literary heri-

tage, and is considered the parent language of Tigre, Tigrigna, and Amharic. Tigre dates the beginning of its literary development to 130 years ago.

In general it can be said that Tigrigna and Tigre together make up 80% of the total population and are most widely distributed throughout the country. In addition, by virtue of the urbanisation of Tigrigna and Tigre speakers, they can be said to belong to a socioeconomic elite. Both languages serve as languages of inter-ethnic communication, in that many members of other nationalities use one of the languages as a second language. Thus, they can serve as *lingua franca* at either national or sub-national levels.

Mazrui and Mazrui's (1992) distinctions are useful here as a clue to how native languages coexist in a multilingual setting. The Eritrean languages, apart from Tigrigna and Tigre, could thus be categorised as intra-ethnic languages of communication and solidarity to which members are sentimentally attached. The interplay of their functional roles as vernacular languages, as media of intra-ethnic, inter-ethnic and/or official languages, is claimed to be very important (Mazrui & Mazrui, 1992).

Another dimension of Mazrui and Mazrui's analysis of African multilingualism which may be used to describe the Eritrean sociolinguistic patterns is their dimension of relative competition and complementarity. They delineate four categories: Afro-ethnic, Afro-Islamic, Afro-western, and Western. According to this rubric, Tigrigna and Kunama, and to a certain degree Bilin, could be counted as examples of Afro-ethnic languages. Despite their family origins, the remaining Eritrean languages, including Arabic, are Afro-Islamic. The influence of Arabic is due to its use as a common religious language. Historically, the spread of Arabic southward over the last few centuries and its assimilating effects are also relevant here. Recent developments in the Tigre language are illustrative. Conditions of war in Eritrea led to a massive exodus of refugees to the Sudan and resulted in lexical influence of Arabic in terms of borrowing and code-switching, especially in the speech of the younger generation.

In Eritrea, Arabic, Tigrigna and English are special status languages, each with different functions in different domains. Though none of the languages is declared an official language, two of them, Tigrigna and Arabic, function as working languages, or *de facto* official languages. The nature of this status needs further elaboration for the relevant contexts. These languages may be described in Cooper's (1989) terms as working, symbolic or statutory official languages. These statuses may not be mutually exclusive, however.

Tigrigna is a symbolic official language in Eritrea; it represents the state of Eritrea in the sense that its revitalisation is associated with the success of the national liberation struggle, which accommodated Tigrigna linguistic nationalism. The imposition of Amharic as the only national language and the resulting resentment helped Eritrean nationalism gain momentum. The effect of this process was to engender among Tigrigna speakers common romantic memories of language and aspirations for its revitalisation. The fate of the language was very much associated with the success of the political struggle, earning Tigrigna a symbolic significance. This process can be compared to the symbolic function Swahili played during the political movement in Tanzania (Cooper, 1989).

When the British assigned Arabic a co-official status along with Tigrigna, it was given a statutory official language function. This decision was based strictly on demographic considerations. Although the use and spread of Arabic had been suppressed, its survival had not been threatened by Ethiopian rule, since the language had an alternative setting where it could develop and be used by native speakers. It is a sacred and prestige language for Moslems in Eritrea. According to Araya (1990), it is the preferred spoken language among the Moslem elite. Despite cultural biases and stereotyping which promotes polarities of 'Arabic-Moslem' versus 'Tigrigna-Christian', future sociolinguistic research may clarify the role of Arabic as a national lingua franca. This research should indicate, among other things, what percentage of the Eritrean Moslem population uses spoken Arabic, at what level of proficiency, and in what kinds of situations. Whatever the findings of this kind of research and whatever differences between reported and actual language use may be, Arabic remains a language of official ceremonies, national gatherings and government declarations. In this sense, therefore, both Tigrigna and Arabic enjoy both statutory and official functions.

English is the medium of instruction from middle and secondary school up to the university level. It also serves as the language of international communication and business. Unlike the situation in many other African nations, it does not serve as a gatekeeper to filter upward movement in the political domain. But it is the language of the educational elite. Unlike other developing nations of Africa, no other private European community or English language schools for the children of the upper class exist. With the growing need of international contacts, the advantages of knowing English become apparent to larger segments of the population.

The influence Italian language even 60 years after the end of colonial period is still strong. A good percentage of the last generation living in towns had a functional knowledge of Italian. The contribution of the Italian language towards the enrichment of the Tigrigna lexicon is significant. Presently there are a couple of Italian kindergartens and one Italian community secondary school. But, the present generation, which went through Amharic-medium schools at some level of its schooling, or worked in Ethiopian civil service can be said to speak reasonably good Amharic.

Finally, the role of the classical language, Geez, deserves mention here. It is a language now generally limited to religious affairs, particularly in the Christian Orthodox Church. Ethiopists considered it to be a carrier of the Abyssinian culture and literary traditions (Ghebremedhin, 1989). It has the same function in Ethiopia. Its status and function is somewhat comparable to that of classical Latin (Bloom & Tamrat, 1996).

## Language Policy in Post-independent Eritrea

In the plenary session of the First National Conference on Eritrean Languages (Asmara, 16–18 August 1996), the Eritrean Peoples Front for Democracy and Justice (PFDJ) acknowledged that the national language policy was not a completely worked out perfect document and that it should be open to improvements and modifications (PFDJ, 1996). That was the first and only forum where

the language issue was debated by participants from all walks of life and ethnic groups. It was also one of the hotly discussed issues, mostly in non-Tigrigna areas, in the debate leading up to the approval of the draft-constitution (1995–1997). Apart from these public forums, the Eritreans in the Diaspora, particularly those in North America and Europe, have debated the issue on the Eritrean web-site *Dehai*. The web-site offers a means for criticism by those who prefer using an international language at the expense of an indigenous language. The language policy issue has so far not been dealt with in academic circles.

The essence of Eritrea's language policy is its recognition of multilingualism and its decision to deal with its complexities. The present government, aware of the problems of other multilingual nations, seems committed to ensuring equality of nationalities, and considers equality a right that is to be secured through public policy. On this background, language policy may support, tolerate or reject multilingualism, and in doing so, it may give special emphasis to one or more languages. Adoption of a language policy, which is meant to promote multilingualism, is based on motivations which are essentially social, cultural, political and economic in nature (Clyne, 1997: 304).

Eritrean language policy has its ideological roots in the EPLF's National Democratic Programme adopted at its first congress in 1977 (EPLF, 1977). This program, which was also endorsed at the second congress in 1987, takes the language issue as an important element of its commitment to ensuring equality of all nationalities (EPLF, 1987). Accordingly, no official status is offered to any one language in order not to marginalise the speakers of other languages. The policy on languages and planning which has followed in Eritrea conforms with a decision-making process in which the Government of Eritrea, the successor of the EPLF, sits at the top of the organisation chart and implements language policy decisions through its agent, the Ministry of Education.

Decisions about language policies move top-down, and the public, which may applaud or resent those decisions, expresses its reactions and exercises its evaluative judgement. The forms of public evaluation vary according to the nationality in question, the social and educational status of the members of that group, and the religion or political ideology the group values. Whatever reasons and intentions, no policy can be successfully implemented without being sanctioned by the government. In order to provide a more practical discussion and a better understanding of Eritrean language policy, in what follows we focus on the implementation process in the field of education and the school systems, considered to be institutions for the construction of social and cultural identities.

### **Language-in-education Planning**

The ways in which the global objectives of language policy and planning processes are related to their implementation can be summarised in Ingram's (1989) statement that education, and particularly the classroom, are sites where all the entities of the whole policy system converge and generate tension:

Language-in-education planning is that field of planning which exists between language policy-making and the classroom and its curriculum. The boundary between language policy-making in general and language-in-education planning is often unclear, but the latter seeks how

within the education planning system the ideas, the goals, and content of the former to the extent they are relevant to education, can be realised. (Ingram, 1989: 53)

The educational institution is recognised not only as an agent of implementation but also as an arena for the interface of macro-level ideologies and micro-level linguistic behaviours in the everyday life of speakers. Particularly in a multilingual setting like in Eritrea, it is a place where relationships of power among ethnolinguistic groups may be formed. According to Pool (1997: 12), 'cultural, educational, and language policies in the post-liberation period derive in the large part from the EPLF practices during the liberation struggle'. In keeping with its egalitarian practices of the pre-independence period, the Ministry of Education of the Government of Eritrea seeks to realise the more general macro-level national objectives of education policy in the school systems in a disciplined and structured manner. Generally stated, the aims of the language policy are:

To foster Eritrean national consciousness and national unity, ensure social justice, commitment to nation building and the cultivation of good citizenry. (Garahtu, 1996: 1)

On the background of this philosophical basis for the policy, the government works towards its realisation through school programs based on multilingual and multicultural considerations. The language in education policy of the Government of Eritrea provides the following:

- (1) Each ethnic group has the right to use its language as the language of instruction at elementary school level.
- (2) The language of instruction at post elementary school level shall be English, while other languages could be introduced as subjects.
- (3) At the elementary school all those students whose medium of instruction is Arabic will take up Tigrigna as a subject, and those whose medium of instruction is Tigrigna will take up Arabic as a subject. Arabic is anyway taught at both levels as a subject. (Garahtu, 1996: 2)

The underlying philosophy of this policy is the recognition and promotion of multilingualism in the state of Eritrea. With mother tongue education at the centre, the policy is based essentially on a pluralist approach to education. The goal is preservation of minority languages and enhancement of multilingualism. Generally speaking, this approach fits into what is known as 'enrichment bilingual education', a variant of a Developmental Maintenance Bilingual Programme which 'aims to go beyond the static maintenance' and promote 'individual and group use of the minority languages, with the intent that it will lead to cultural pluralism and to the social autonomy of the ethnic group' (Baker, 1996: 173). In contrast, both the switch from mother tongue instruction in primary school to English at the secondary level and the teaching of Arabic and Tigrigna as subjects of instruction characterise bilingual approaches with a clear transitional flavour. That transitional orientation may be somewhat mitigated by the multilingual nature of Eritrean society and by the fact that English is a foreign, rather than a second language for most of the Eritrean population, whereas most

cases of transitional bilingual education involve transition to a language spoken natively by a large segment of the indigenous population (e.g. English in the United States, French in France).

Above we claimed that language policy constitutes a decision-making process that is political in nature. Effects of that policy, by their very nature, take a long time to be realised in observable and quantifiable terms. During the process, reactions of language policy consumers may provide feedback which decision-makers then use to make alterations within the overall strategy of the policy. Whether and how these reactions and debates affect the decision-making process depends on how they are presented. There is an inherent tension between the need for public evaluation and discussion and the orderly, efficient implementation of the policy. Emotionally charged arguments, sometimes based on ungrounded assumptions, may stem from prejudices and mistrust. Such emotion will affect implementation of even the most ideal policy. In a climate of rhetoric, the symbolic value of a language may become inflated beyond its objective proportions, for example, in terms of number of speakers, frequency of use, etc. Cooper (1989: 86) writes about the symbolic potential, as follows:

When a language serves or can be made to serve, as a symbol of a glorious past, or of the unique genius of a people, the elites and counter-elites who manipulate this symbol can use it to maintain or acquire legitimacy in the name of authenticity and tradition.

Language policy and planning, a relatively young discipline, may not yet be capable of prescribing magic formulas to offer to the planner as a panacea for all language problems, especially in the case of a multilingual society on which little research has been done. The discipline does, however, suggest frameworks within which variables for the analysis of language planning can be studied. In that light, variables relevant to the particularity of the situation in which the policy is to be implemented deserve careful attention.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

Within the overall conception of language policy as a decision-making process, an attempt has been made in this paper to identify and to describe which actors attempt to influence what behaviours, of which people, for what ends (Cooper, 1989). Two more questions, which need further investigation and analysis, remain: under what circumstances and with what effects are those policies implemented. To these ends, we feel the brief account of the evolution of language policy in each of Eritrea's colonial periods and the relevant historical data which led to these social contexts provides some background knowledge of the circumstances under which current Eritrean policy functions. With regard to the question pertaining to the effects of Eritrean language policy, not much can be said at this point in time. Field-based studies, such as the Netherlands-Israel Research Programme (NIRP) sponsored project 'Unity and Diversity via Multilingualism' in which the authors are engaged at present, are expected to provide some indication. Reports coming out from the Ministry of Education point to the problems of implementation of various forms of language policy. Apart from the administrative challenges in terms of textbook preparation,



teacher training, supervision, lack of motivation of teachers due to low salaries and difficult living conditions in the countryside, one important issue at present revolves around the attitude of the parents of language minority children. From informal reports available, there are indications that some parents from the Afar, Tigre and Saho nationalities prefer Arabic to their own vernaculars.

Although nation-building is not a function of language policy decisions, the connection between language and nationality and a sense of political community offers insight into the political process. Language policy (official and/or educational) is a decision-making process with complex economic, social, cultural and political ramifications. Careful articulation of the cultural, religious and political dimensions of language choice may help clarify some of the issues. Language is a delicate subject in Eritrea; it faces all kinds of reactions, ranging from the sentimentally charged applause of government supporters to outright disapproval in the polemics of counter-elites. The direction from which these reactions emanate may be less important than the question of whose interests these discourses represent. A critical question for language planning in Eritrea should focus on bringing together the macro and micro level perspectives on language issues. Solutions will depend on appropriate sociolinguistic investigations which look at language use at different levels of communication vis-a-vis the effects of the policy on the various facets of the society's life.

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